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On Proposed Water Resources Legislation for Coastal
Louisiana Following Hurricanes Rita and Katrina
October 18, 2005

The astonishing scope of the devastation caused by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina challenges us to examine why so many lives and so much property were subject to these disasters, and demands that we take an honest look at the policy choices that put hundreds of thousands of people in harm's way. It also demands of us that we do better next time, as we look ahead to the tremendous work of rebuilding culturally and economically vital communities in a sensitive coastal region that is perennially subject to severe storms and flooding.

While land use decisions are and should remain local, Federal dollars and policies strongly influence local choices about where and how to build. The Army Corps of Engineers is a striking example of this. Through its water projects, the Corps has had and will continue to have an enormous impact on local infrastructure and development patterns throughout coastal Louisiana and portions of the Gulf of Mexico. Where and how the Corps decides to rebuild its flood control systems is perhaps the most fundamental element in the future sustainability of the region.

The regions most devastated by Hurricane Katrina are in low-lying flood-prone areas that are protected from storms and flooding by a combination of natural wetlands and barrier islands, and hundreds of miles of levees, floodgates, pumping stations, drainage canals and pipes. In the rebuilding process, careful consideration must be given to whether rebuilding should occur in all areas. For example, areas that are inherently at risk for flooding and that can be made safe – if at all – only by costly and potentially unreliable man-made levees should be reconsidered. Certain areas should not be developed if they can provide more benefits as natural wetlands, acting to absorb floodwaters and buffer developed areas from storms.

As much pressure as many communities feel to open up new land for development, the Federal government – on behalf of its taxpayers - must help communities that want to make sound decisions about where to grow. Many communities – seeking to preserve natural areas or farmland – are already using established and effective design principles to build more compact, vital neighborhoods, cities and regions. The result is desirable and sustainable high quality communities with a variety of benefits for individuals and their local governments. For instance, smart growth communities can reduce personal housing costs as well as the costs of public infrastructure, leaving more public funds available for higher quality infrastructure including improved transportation systems and flood control approaches.

For areas that will be redeveloped, the nature of flood protection systems is vital to the safety and well-being of the community. There is little question that the devastation of New Orleans and other coastal communities was intensified by the loss of natural buffer systems such as coastal wetlands, marshes, and barrier beaches that have historically protected against storm

events. Such areas have been depleted by poorly planned land development and man-made levees on the Mississippi River and other waterways. Yet such natural barriers can serve as the most effective, least costly and most low-maintenance protection available.

Given the significance of protecting and restoring these natural storm buffers, and the key role that projects of the Corps have in this process, Smart Growth America makes the following recommendations:

- Federal and state agencies, including the Corps and EPA, should work together to develop a comprehensive plan to restore the coastal wetlands and barrier islands of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast.
- Congress should require the Corps to prioritize its flood control projects based on risk reduction and safety outcomes rather than simply on economic viability.
- Congress should create an independent advisory body to oversee the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast flood control system and wetlands restoration efforts to ensure that the Corps and local communities have access to the best possible expert advice.
- Congress should modernize the Corps' planning guidelines to remove barriers and disincentives to nonstructural flood control projects and to promote projects that protect and restore healthy wetland and riparian areas.
- Congress should fund the purchase of riparian and other lands needed to expand nonstructural flood protection.
- Congress should work with the Administration to update the various Executive Orders that guide the response of the Corps, FEMA and other Federal agencies to floodplain management, wetlands protection and nonstructural flood control measures.
- Congress should strengthen the wetlands mitigation laws and policies of the Corps to ensure that they reflect the national policy of “no net loss” of wetlands.
- Congress should task the EPA with providing technical assistance to flood-prone communities seeking to protect their residents by planning to move future growth out of floodplains.
- Congress should task the Corps with developing guidelines for use of hurricane debris as construction fill, road bed material and other re-uses that could speed the cleanup of communities, put local people to work and lower the cost of reconstruction.

Given the significant influence of the Corps in the rebuilding process, Congress should ensure that decision-making for flood control repair is accomplished through thoughtful planning with significant citizen input. Congress should provide funding for the Corps to participate with other appropriate Federal, state and local agencies in local visioning activities that guide citizens through development options. Citizens should be involved in deciding where redevelopment should occur, which flood protection structures should be restored, where and what kind of nonstructural flood control systems can be employed, and the possible relocation of hazardous materials.

While not all of these issues are technically under the jurisdiction of the Corps, they will all be impacted by Corps projects, and the Corps should work actively with citizens to hear their concerns and implement consensus-based decisions wherever possible.